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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0405  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0328  
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0109  
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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#) [IN](#)  
SUBJECT: KOLKATA PUBLIC AFFAIRS REACHES OUT TO EASTERN INDIA'S MUSLIM  
COMMUNITY

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Students and faculty at Muslim schools (madrassas) in West Bengal are enthusiastic to interact with U.S. government officials generally and have been appreciative in particular with the outreach by the Kolkata American Center through participation in MicroAccess English-language and book donation programs, as well as cultural events. While the local Muslim community is open to engagement, there are others, however, who may not look upon this interaction favorably. Reacting to pressure from Saudi donors, a local madrassa was forced to cancel a performance featuring female acrobats that had been arranged by the Consulate Kolkata Public Affairs Section, and a ground-breaking speaking tour by a prominent American Muslim scholar was ignored by the local English-language media, although it received extensive, favorable coverage in the Urdu-language press. End Summary.

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Madrassas Reach Out to Kolkata PAS  
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¶2. (SBU) Consulate Kolkata's Public Affairs Section (PAS) is actively engaged in reaching out to the Muslim community of eastern India in many ways, including speaker programs, MicroAccess English language learning, book donations, establishing contacts with NGOs active in Muslim-majority areas,

as well as cultural and entertainment events. The audiences, particularly for English language learning and book donations at madrassas, are enthusiastic about interacting with Kolkata PAS and invariably request extensions for language teaching programs. American speakers who address Islamic themes attract large audiences among area Muslims, responding to many questions from audiences about the place of Islam in American society. Interestingly, the few occasions when we have encountered difficulties meeting program expectations were due to either outside pressure on area Muslims, or non-Muslim influence in local media.

13. (U) Since November 2006, Consulate Kolkata's Public Affairs Officer (PAO) has interacted with students and faculty at five Muslim schools (madrassas) in West Bengal and one in Patna, Bihar. These madrassas typically have between 500 to 1,000 students, many of them boarders living in on-campus student hostels. Only two of the six schools are co-educational, while three are for male students and one only accepts females. Although some start with kindergarten, most area madrassas offer classes to students between the ages of eight and eighteen, or the equivalent of third grade through high school. The medium of instruction in madrassas in West Bengal is the local language (Bengali), although both Urdu- and Arabic-language classes are usually mandatory.

14. (U) Many if not most of the students at all of the madrassas with which we interact are unable to pay tuition and/or boarding fees; in such cases the students are accepted free of charge and are supported by "zaqat," or donations. Some 29 percent of West Bengal's total population of 80 million is Muslim, with the vast majority of Muslim students in state schools. In fact, many

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poorer Muslims select madrassas for their children because of the prospect of receiving "zaqat" assistance to defray room and board expenses. Designing programs for madrassa audiences is thus a way to not only reach Muslim youth, but also to make an impact on the poorer segment of the Muslim community. None of the madrassas we have visited receive financial assistance from the government. Of an estimated 7,000 madrassas in West Bengal, only several hundred receive some form of monetary assistance from official sources. Most resist offers of government assistance because they believe that will inevitably lead to pressure to conform to the state's views on curriculum content.

15. (SBU) After addressing students and faculty at madrassas, Kolkata PAO always opens the floor to any and all questions, with the most common tending to be about social customs in America, as well as the situation for Muslims living in the U.S. Girls often ask if it is legal to dress in traditional Muslim clothing for women, such as the hejab, in the United States, and about dating customs. Both boys and girls are very curious to know if Islam is growing in numbers and influence and whether non-Muslims discriminate against Muslims. Questions about politics usually center on American policy in Iraq (the manner in which Saddam Hussein was executed elicits quite a bit of anger), Afghanistan, and the Kashmir issue, with little interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After these rather freewheeling question-and-answer sessions, the students, even those asking challenging questions, often approach the PAO to shake his hand and invite him back for more discussion.

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¶6. (U) All of these madrassas are keen that PAS either initiate or extend MicroAccess English language programs. During one recent visit to the al-Medina Madrassa in Memari, Burdwan district, two-hours' drive northwest of Kolkata, PAO distributed certificates to 75 students upon their completion of a one-year MicroAccess program. Students at al-Medina were so enthusiastic that more than 200 have signed a petition requesting that post renew the program for a second year. At lunch, during which the newly-certified students serenaded PAO from the hallway with a slightly off-key rendition of "We Shall Overcome," the faculty pressed for assurances that funding for instructors and textbooks for the English program be renewed for another year.

¶7. (U) Book donations to madrassa libraries are extremely popular. Not only do these donations reinforce the students' nascent English-language skills; they are also a valuable window on an outside world that the students, many of them villagers, have never had the opportunity to experience. PAS New Delhi provides several types of book sets for donation, including a "madrassa set" which usually includes titles on diversity in the U.S. and comparative religion. In our experience, however, the most appreciated and even cherished donations are encyclopedia

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sets; one set entitled "General Book of Knowledge" is appropriate for the students' level of English. Upon donating this set, we have seen students avidly pulling the books off the shelves even before we leave the premises.

¶8. (U) It is difficult to exaggerate the value students and faculty place on these book donations, given the meager resources available in most madrassa libraries. During one recent visit to the library of a madrassa outside Kolkata, PAO asked the director if the library had an English-language encyclopedia. The director pointed with pride to a dusty set of the Encyclopedia Britannica high on a shelf. PAO reached for one volume and, opening the book, noted that it was the ninth edition, dated 1883. Within one month of this visit Kolkata PAS returned and donated a current set of the General Book of Knowledge, much to the students' delight.

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Still, Roadblocks Remain

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¶9. (SBU) Although the local Muslim community in eastern India is generally open to our outreach efforts, we do sometimes encounter difficulties from other quarters. For example, Kolkata PAS programmed a troupe of American acrobats to perform for the students at a madrassa where a MicroAccess English program has been particularly successful. The faculty at the school arranged for the venue, in the process inviting hundreds of local townspeople to join the students for the show. When one of the school's prominent donors, the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank, came to know on the night before the show was to take place that female performers were part of the act, they demanded that either the females not perform or the show be cancelled. As the male acrobats refused to perform without their female partners, the show was cancelled, which was a huge embarrassment for the madrassa's administration. As the president of the madrassa explained to Kolkata PAO, "We are

deeply embarrassed, please accept our apologies, but they are an important donor and must be made happy." (Note: At another madrassa without Saudi or other outside financial donors the same show went on as planned without incident.)

¶10. (SBU) On another occasion, Kolkata PAS programmed a prominent American Muslim scholar, Imam Yahya Hendi of Georgetown University, for three days of speaking engagements at area Muslim and secular institutions, including Calcutta University and the Sola Ana Mosque, one of the largest in Kolkata. Imam Hendi is well-known among Muslim scholars in eastern India and he drew large and appreciative audiences, who were not hesitant to ask him probing questions about his views on politics and American society. The high point was his visit to the Sola Ana Mosque, where he led Friday prayers and attracted a crowd of over 15,000 very enthusiastic worshippers. He also addressed the congregation on the theme of harmony and cooperation between cultures and religions. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with thousands jostling to touch him.

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¶11. (SBU) The event at the Sola Ana Mosque was well-attended by local press and media. However, although the Urdu-language press gave Imam Hendi's speaking engagements prominent and favorable coverage, the English-language dailies (the sole exception being the Indian Express) completely ignored his visit. Given the presence of journalists from the English and vernacular media at all the Imam's events, the prominence of the venues, and the interest that his visit generated among area Muslims, we asked the reporters why their newspapers had not printed stories. Reporters present at Imam Hendi's speaking engagements and the Friday prayers at the mosque (from the Times of India, Hindustan Times, Statesman, Telegraph, Asian Age) all told us they filed stories but that none of their reports were printed. The reporters, all of whom are Muslim, told us they believe their stories were not printed because the subject was "about Muslim issues" and that their editors were displaying a, perhaps unconscious, anti-Muslim bias. And while it is true that a segment of the Muslim population was reached through the many favorable articles published about the Imam's visit in the Urdu press, a significant part of the Muslim community depends on English or vernacular language sources for its news; the result was that we did not reach this significant group. The only English-language newspaper to cover the story, the Indian Express, has a very small circulation in Kolkata (5,000) and, perhaps significantly, a news editor who is a former International Visitor and who continues to maintain close personal contact with the American Center.

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Comment  
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¶12. (SBU) India is the world's third-largest Muslim country, but nevertheless Muslims are in a minority and must accommodate majority attitudes which may not encourage their interaction with outsiders. Although Kolkata PAS' experience engaging with local Muslim audiences has generally been positive, there are other factors which serve to limit interaction. In eastern India, relatively poor Muslim institutions are sometimes financially dependent on outside donors who may be more socially conservative than local Muslims. Unrestricted interaction with the non-Muslim community, much less the United States, can be a casualty of the influence these donors inevitably wield. And as Imam Hendi's visit illustrates, when inter-religious prejudices

exist, the local power structure (whether it be political parties or media) can limit the scope of outreach programs.

¶13. (SBU) As the experience of Consulate Kolkata PAS' Muslim outreach program illustrates, local Muslims may be welcoming, but face outside pressures or antipathy of others, both local and distant, who see no value in promoting dialogue between Islam and the United States. Given the receptivity of the local Muslim community for more interaction with the United States, greater engagement through increased public affairs programs would help to overcome the obstacles of anti-American sentiment. JARDINE